

Where are we heading?



What does the future hold for tai chi? Robert Agar-Hutton offers some thoughts on the future of our art...

TAI CHI – THE FUTURE

What does the future hold for tai chi? Let's start with some questions:

- Is the art of tai chi going to improve or be reduced to a shadow of its former self?
- Will 'Wave hands like spaghetti' - tai chi that is so soft that it becomes a meaningless uber-easy 'exercise' - become the norm?
- Will lineage become more and more meaningless as the number of instructors increase, and is lineage actually of any importance anyway?
- Is the fighting art relevant in a modern society where either 'knife-fu', 'gun-fu' or 'car-fu' (an attack with a knife, gun, or even running someone down with your car) will beat kung-fu pretty much every time?
- Should tai chi be developed into a mode of physical exercise based on sports and exercise physiology and medicine and not on old wives tales and dubious pseudoscience?

Of course, there are other questions and some may even be more important than those above, but let's start with those.

Improving tai chi

Is tai chi going to improve? I think that the answer is a big YES. On a daily basis there is more and more information about tai chi released via the internet and published in books. I am old enough to remember when the 'words of wisdom' from an instructor were almost always believed, and there was no way at all to check their truth or worth. Those days have gone, as long as students are inquisitive and willing to do a bit of research. Of course, not all information is good or worthwhile, but an informed and widely-researched audience is better than an uninformed one.

There is also the pressure of market forces. The majority of tai chi is taught for money and consumers are more aware and more demanding than their forebears. The internet (and other advertising mediums) coupled with a more mobile population means that if you are the only instructor in a town, you cannot guarantee to dominate the local market as would have been the case a generation or so ago.



Robert Agar-Hutton

The coronavirus pandemic has broadened the marketplace for many instructors as they have learned to teach via zoom, and has also educated consumers as they realise that their potential tai chi instructor can be 'virtually' anywhere in the world.

Will it become too soft? Here there is a real and ongoing concern. We live in an age where 'quick and easy' seems to be the mantra that every advertisement is selling. Easy tai chi that does not require any work or straining of muscles seems to meet the requirements of 'be relaxed' and so is an easy trap for students and less experienced instructors to fall in to.

Hard and easy

I teach mainly an older demographic and strive to get them (and myself) to constantly push the boundaries of what is possible for our bodies to do. Obviously, there are limits and especially with older students, safety must come first. However, throughout life the human body is capable of developing and improving and a good instructor should be showing how the correct practice and application of tai chi can allow growth to continue. Sadly this is not always the case.

One of the things that needs to be done is for good instructors to articulate the fact that learning tai chi is not 'hard' but neither is it 'easy' - it requires work and commitment and there will be the occasional ache as the body is encouraged to develop and grow. It is very easy to get caught up in the marketing of the art.

Perhaps the most interesting thing that I have observed is that generally students who are older seem to be more willing to put in the work than the younger ones... Maybe because life has taught them that hard work is necessary to gain rewards.

The importance of lineage.

I have been taught by people of impeccable lineage and by people with either dubious lineage or indeed no lineage at all (they learned from someone without lineage, or learned from books, or made it up) and in my experience



lineage is absolutely NOT an indication that an instructor will be capable of teaching the art.

Further, I learned years ago, that as a beginner you often learn more from a new or intermediate instructor than from a 'grandmaster'. This is because many teachers who are very experienced have lost the ability to frame information in a simple way. You don't get many university maths professors also teaching maths at preschool. It requires a different skill set.

Lineage is also often an excuse for poor teaching methodology – I have met people who could do amazing things and had undeniable skill, but used their lineage as a certificate of competence rather than taking the time to develop teaching skills.

Teaching safely

For a beginner, who is starting to learn tai chi, lineage is of little to no importance. The important issues are: can the instructor teach, and can they teach skills that are fit for purpose. If I go to a tai chi class, I don't expect to be taught either Muay Thai or interpretive dance, and I expect to be taught safely by someone who understands good body mechanics – simple things like keeping the knee from being torqued by incorrect posture or movement, to ensure the long-term physical wellbeing. And yes, I have been to classes that would fail both of those tests.

Where lineage is useful, is for an intermediate or experienced student who specifically wants to learn tai chi of a particular style or from a specific branch of that style. Here is where being aware of an instructor's lineage will allow the student to be more certain that they are actually learning the style or sub-style that they want.

Another instance where lineage is important is where a student wants to be a teacher, then learning from a lineage holder can lead to that student also becoming a recognised lineage holder. However, that said, out of the hundreds of students that I have taught, only a handful have ever wanted to instruct, so for most students this is not

important.

One thing that does worry me is that a few people who are (or claim to be) lineage holders, use it as a way to climb onto the 'My tai chi is the only real tai chi' soapbox. This is both sad and patently untrue. Equivalent to someone who drives a Volvo (or any make of car) saying that only Volvos (or whatever) are the only true car.

Tai chi for fighting. I love the practical aspects of the art. I had studied the art (a couple of different versions of Yang style, and Lee style) for a number of years and my instructors had taught me 'tai chi dance' – i.e. the form without application. I then came across a teacher who had disassembled the 24 move modern Yang form (What I originally learned in Malaysia as the 'Peking form') and was able to show me how EVERY move could be utilised to either maim or kill an opponent. Wow was I surprised at the extreme violence that was hidden (pretty much in plain sight) in the form.

Self improvement

Now, I am not a fighter and don't want to be. My interest is in martial arts for self improvement and self defence. Further, I do not think, for one moment, that the art that most students learn once or twice a week will give practical self defence skills. Self defence requires much more than knowing how to wave hands like clouds. But, I also think that every instructor should know and understand the fighting principles of the art and should teach some of those principles and applications – Covid-19 protocols allowing – because the understanding of the body mechanics necessary for efficient fighting underpins the mechanics needed for health and wellness.

Science or pseudoscience?

I'm going to deliberately ignore the bigger part of this debate that centres around the science of the traditional Chinese medicine model versus the modern western medicine one. I am also going to sideline the conversation

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that we could have about, is ‘chi’ a manipulable esoteric force that is currently unproven by modern science or is it just a handy metaphor that allows people to discuss things they don’t actually understand?

How much ‘chi’ in a bag of tai chi?

Seriously, should instructors continue to spout the words that they heard from their instructors who in turn either heard it from theirs, or just made it up as they didn’t have an accurate answer, or should we all demand that what we teach has an empirical basis?

I am a bit of a science geek – blame it on the schooling I suffered through as a youngster – and I do like to know that what I am being told by my instructors and what I am teaching my students is verifiable. That is, are there a number of peer-reviewed papers that are published in reputable scientific journals, that validate the claims made? All too often the stories and instruction that teachers give, sadly fail this test.

Recently, one of my instructors mentioned nitric oxide and nose breathing. Now I have taught nose breathing for years, but had never heard about nitric oxide. So, I went and did some research – and OK it was a bit of a deep rabbit hole to go down – but it was verifiable factual information that explained the beneficial effects nitric oxide has on the body and how it is produced when you nose breathe – it was great to be able to absolutely confirm something so interesting.

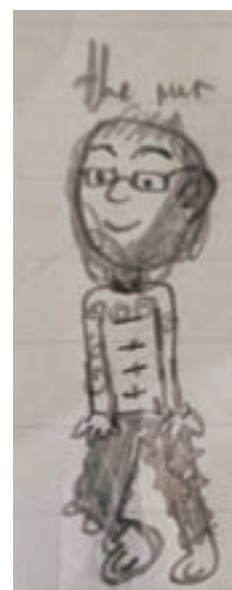
Unscientific?

Now, I will admit that I also occasionally, very occasionally, will use non proven, unscientific, stories, jargon, or explanations too. An example, when doing the qigong standing resting posture I may say: “Men place your right hand over the left and ladies the left over the right” – and yes, I know it is a binary definition in a non-binary gendered world, but nothing is perfect... Anyway, for years and years and years, instructors would say to do

that (or the reverse – which is very confusing!) and I just considered it a bit of tai chi folklore. I had asked various instructors ‘why’, but never received a satisfactory answer. However a few years ago, an instructor from Shanghai who was over in the UK on a tour answered with a logical and internally consistent answer based on Chinese yin yang theory and I thought to myself, well it may not be hard evidence but it certainly makes sense and (more importantly) will do no harm if I put it into practice.

So, I guess I am issuing an appeal for instructors to veer towards science but acknowledging that a little bit of hearsay and magical thinking may be what gives tai chi some of its appeal.

Going forward. You can’t do tai chi for over 40 years (as I have) without becoming biased and opinionated and probably more than just slightly crazy... but I do hope that I have at least 20 more years of teaching tai chi and maybe more... So I am invested in the idea that tai chi should be taught to ‘everyone’ and that the tai chi that is taught should be the very best it can be. I hope that open and honest discussion is the way forward. 🧘



Fan art of Robert Agar-Hutton drawn by the granddaughter of a member of a WI group Robert was giving a talk to

Note: This article is intended as a thought piece to start discussion. Of course, I have my own thoughts but the world of tai chi is so vast, and there are so many different viewpoints, that your thoughts and opinions matter at least as much as mine



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Mark Peters, Midlands Tai Chi Rehab, Website: www.midlandstaichirehab.co.uk Tel: +44(0)121 251 6172
mob / whatsapp: +44(0)7831 743737

